

**U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren**  
**Floor Speech on Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act**  
**February 2, 2015**

Thank you Mr. President. I come to the floor in strong support of the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act.

Our men and women in uniform serve our country with honor and courage. They put themselves in harm's way day in and day out to protect us. I have a special appreciation for how much service members and their families contribute to our country, and how important it is that we honor their service. All three of my brothers served in the military, and my oldest brother was career military - he flew 288 combat missions in Vietnam. When you grow up in a family with someone in the military, you know how lucky you are to see them come home safely. But that doesn't mean that the sacred trust with our service members ends the moment they step off a plane. We owe our service members the very best, and that means ensuring that they always have access to high-quality services and care, including mental health care.

The Clay Hunt SAV Act, introduced in the Senate by Senators John McCain and Richard Blumenthal, would strengthen critical mental health care services and suicide prevention resources for our country's veterans. We've heard the deeply troubling statistics: The VA has reported that 22 veterans die each day from suicide. Data collected in the "Back Home" project shows that while 10 percent of Americans served in the military, veterans make up 20 percent of all suicides in the United States. These statistics tell us that something is deeply wrong and that we need to make significant changes.

The SAV Act calls for an evaluation of the mental health services and suicide prevention efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense, and it launches a pilot program to provide education loan repayment for psychiatrists who work at the VA. It also helps build stronger partnerships between the VA and non-profit organizations working with veterans in our community.

The SAV Act is named for Clay Hunt, a Marine veteran from Texas who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and was a strong advocate for improved services for his fellow veterans. He struggled with post-traumatic stress, and when he was unable to access the care he needed from the VA, he took his own life.

As Clay's mother Susan Selke said in her testimony at a Senate Veterans Affairs Committee hearing last summer, "Not one more veteran should have to go through what Clay went through with the VA after returning home from the war. Not one more parent should have to testify before a congressional committee to compel the VA to fulfill its responsibilities to those who served and sacrificed."

She went on to say: "The reforms, evaluations, and programs directed by this legislation will be critical to helping the VA better serve and treat veterans suffering from mental

injuries from war. Had the VA been doing these things all along, it very well may have saved Clay's life."

I'm proud that Massachusetts has taken steps at the state level to help improve suicide prevention resources for veterans, such as establishing the Statewide Advocacy for Veterans' Empowerment program, or SAVE. The SAVE team is comprised of veterans who work directly in the community to connect veterans and their families to services provided by the Commonwealth and nonprofits. I've also visited several outstanding community organizations in Massachusetts, such as Veterans Inc in Worcester, Soldier On in Pittsfield, and the New England Center for Homeless Veterans in Boston, that work tirelessly to help service members access the full range of services they need and deserve, from housing and education to health care.

In August, I met with veterans in Framingham, Massachusetts at a mobile vet center. One of the veterans I heard from was Army Major Justin Fitch, who was working at the Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center. Justin, who is battling terminal cancer and has had his own struggles with depression, is retiring from the Army just this week – but he still is a powerful and a relentless voice fighting to improve care and prevent suicides among veterans fighting depression and psychological stress after returning home from war.

Justin told me: "Too many veterans are suffering in silence. Twenty-two a day is a lot. One is too many."

And Justin is right. Our armed service men and women are tough, smart, and courageous. They make huge sacrifices to keep our families safe, and we owe them all a true debt of gratitude for their service. But gratitude isn't enough. We must do more to protect our men and women in uniform who devote their lives to the service of our country.

It's clear that Congress has more work to do to bolster our nation's commitment to supporting veterans and providing the mental health care services they deserve. The Clay Hunt SAV Act is an important part of this effort. I hope my colleagues will join me in voting to pass this legislation in the Senate.